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**HEADLINE:** Second span on fast track: 'Time to get out of this rut,' says Ambassador Bridge boss

**SOURCE:** Windsor Star

**BYLINE:** Dave Battagello

**BODY:**

Fed up with government inaction, the Ambassador Bridge company Thursday outlined an aggressive plan to construct a second bridge and end Windsor's truck traffic problems.

"It's time to get out of this rut and get on with it," said Dan Stamper, president of the Ambassador Bridge. "Let's not remain stuck in the mud."

The Detroit International Bridge Company, controlled by trucking empire mastermind Manuel "Matty" Moroun, has filed permit applications with both U.S. and Canadian governments to build a new \$400-million Cdn span across the Detroit River.

Company officials said that after examining several options it makes the best business sense to build a second span right next to the current bridge, just metres to the west.

The company's plan calls for a new four-lane bridge with the potential to add two more lanes. The old bridge would be used for four lanes of traffic into the U.S., while the new bridge would carry traffic into Canada. Essentially the same customs and toll plazas would remain in place with some redesign and expansion on both sides of the border.

Stamper said the bridge could be built by summer 2009.

But Stamper said Moroun -- among the top property owners in Michigan -- remain open to other crossing routes if called for by local or senior governments.

"If they want it on Ojibway Parkway, Lauzon (Parkway) or somewhere else, that's fine," he said.

"We will look at it. Let's just get going."

Kevin Weeks, director of field operations for U.S. Customs and Border Protection in Detroit, said staffing a new bridge should not be a problem.

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When asked about security concerns from having two bridges in such close proximity, Weeks would only say a precedent has already been set in the area with twin bridges in Sarnia-Port Huron.

Mayor Eddie Francis said the city's lawyer for the border situation, David Estrin, has been asked to examine the bridge's move.

"Just because an application has been filed for twinning the bridge, it doesn't mean its the best place or the right plan," Francis said.

City council continues to wait for a report from its hired transportation guru, New York's Sam Schwartz -- also known as Gridlock Sam -- expected to soon come forward with recommendations to resolve the local truck traffic crisis.

"We are not going to settle for just any plan," Francis said. "Neighbourhoods have to be protected. We brought (Schwartz) in because he is the expert. Quality of life and communities not being destroyed -- those are things he is considering."

Councillor Ron Jones, who represents the west end, said he was not surprised by the bridge's application.

"They been taking steps all along to do this," Jones said. "No way in the world can I see this happening. I'm trusting the system will say this is not the appropriate plan. If they want to build, do it somewhere else. I feel it would be a detriment to Windsor."

MP Brian Masse (NDP -- Windsor West), said the Ambassador Bridge has been able to move aggressively because of the void in leadership at the federal level.

"They have every right to do what they are doing and file applications," Masse said. "But as a nation, not just locally, we have to find a better alternative. I don't think the Ambassador Bridge expanding their operation is going to benefit anybody."

"I believe it's time for a public crossing. This is the only place where there is this type of market dominance. We as a nation need to invest in infrastructure when it affects so much trade. This has to have public ownership."

MPP Sandra Pupatello (L -- Windsor West) said she can understand the bridge company's frustration because of government inaction.

"The problem for me is not so much two spans, but what happens with the lead in and lead off from those spans in our community. This doesn't alleviate the concerns on Huron Church Road."

Emna Dahak, spokeswoman for Ontario's Ministry of Transportation, said it was reviewing the application and attempting to determine the impact on the binational study, a multi-level effort to find a long-term border crossing solution.

Action by the bridge company should trigger a response from competing proponents.

Former mayor Mike Hurst, CEO for the Detroit River Tunnel Partnership, a competing proposal to convert the city's rail tunnel for truck traffic, said the bridge's announcement "confirms what the DRTP has been saying all along" in that more border capacity is needed in Windsor.

As for DRTP's next step, Hurst responded: "We see ourselves in a different ballgame. We view ourselves as the only plan that can be done in the short term."

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Ross Clarke, general manager for Mich-Can bridge proposal, said his group will meet within a few weeks to determine its next step and also how to respond to the bridge's repeated overtures to utilize the same Ojibway Parkway corridor contained in its bridge proposal.

"Of course we are surprised at that and obviously concerned about it," Clarke said. "We really don't see this going anywhere at this point because we are assuming nothing will proceed until the binational (study) completes its process."

**GRAPHIC:** Colour Photo: CONSTRUCTION PLANS: This is a conceptual image, viewed from the U.S. side, of the Ambassador Bridge's plan to twin its crossing. The company says it can be completed by the summer of 2009.

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